

California farmers are low on water: Why not help them go solar?

May 20 2024, by Sammy Roth, Los Angeles Times



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

It sounds like a climate solution everyone should be able to support: Let's make it easier and cheaper for farmers with dwindling water supplies to convert their lands from crop production to solar energy generation, if

that's what those farmers want.

So why did the California Legislature just reject such a bill?

"Change can be difficult," said Shannon Eddy, executive director of the Large-scale Solar Association.

Tell me about it.

Even as coal, oil and gas combustion fuel an ever-deadlier rise in [global temperatures](#), finding a spot to build a solar or wind farm where no one will object is damn near impossible. Some concerns are legitimate, such as safeguarding wildlife habitat and sacred Indigenous sites. Others, not so much. Take, for example, false claims that living near [renewable energy projects](#) can cause health problems—claims that have been spread by groups with ties to the fossil fuel industry, and by former President Trump.

The misinformation campaigns, unfortunately, aren't going anywhere.

But in the American West—where pristine landscapes are treasured, and dry times are getting drier with climate change—the region's abundant agricultural lands seem like a great place to put [solar panels](#) while minimizing environmental conflicts.

In California in particular, groundwater levels have fallen dramatically after decades of overpumping, especially by Central Valley farmers. Global warming, meanwhile, is sapping the river flows that also supply large amounts of water to agribusinesses.

So it's no surprise that a growing number of farmers are converting some of their fields to solar.

"In one case we're growing an agricultural product that has value, and in another case we're producing electrons that have value," Steven Swartz, an executive at Wonderful Co., the company owned by billionaires Stewart and Lynda Resnick, told me in 2019.

For some farmers, though, there's a financial obstacle: the Williamson Act.

Also known as the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, the law gives property tax breaks to landowners who sign contracts agreeing to keep their land in agricultural production or open space for at least 10 years.

Landowners who make those deals are taxed based on the value of their land for what it's currently being used for (i.e. farming), rather than the full market value of the land (which would be a lot higher, since the landowner could otherwise sell to a residential or commercial developer).

The Williamson Act's goal—as explained to me by Chris Scheuring, senior counsel for California Farm Bureau Federation—was to preserve farms and ranches as property values rose in the 1950s and 1960s, sending suburbs sprawling in all directions.

The law has had climate benefits too: Keeping new housing more tightly packed in cities can limit long freeway commutes. Plus, "working lands" such as farms and ranches can be useful for absorbing heat-trapping carbon emissions if handled with care.

"The Williamson Act is an important statute. It's a successful statute," Scheuring said.

The challenge can arise if a grower wants to switch from vegetables, nuts

or other crops to solar energy.

To get out of a Williamson Act agreement, a landowner typically must wait out the 10-year contract or pay an upfront fee—often 12.5% of their land's full market value, to account for the fact that they've benefited from years of reduced tax payments.

That makes sense in a nutshell.

But here's the thing: We're in a desperate hurry to stave off the worsening heat waves, floods and fires of the climate crisis. And under the state groundwater law, there will almost certainly be huge amounts of farmland fallowed in the San Joaquin Valley.

So why not tweak the Williamson Act to make it cheaper for those growers to switch to solar?

That was the idea behind Assembly Bill 2528 from Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula, a Fresno Democrat.

Here's how it would have worked: In eight San Joaquin Valley counties with groundwater basins that state officials consider to be in "critical overdraft," landowners could have asked local politicians to cancel their Williamson Act contracts for a fee of just 6.25%, half the normal rate, if they wanted to use their properties for solar farms, wind turbines or batteries—or transmission lines that hook up to renewable energy projects. A portion of the fees would have paid for local "community benefits packages."

Arambula told me the Williamson Act has proved especially challenging for landowners who want to go solar because the 10-year contracts renew every year unless a farmer decides to cancel—a process that takes a decade, or else that hefty upfront fee.

"This bill allows us to begin to site and build these solar projects sooner," he said.

The legislation cleared the Assembly's utilities and agriculture committees with no dissenting votes, powered by supporters that included solar developers, agriculture industry groups and unions whose members build solar and wind farms.

But on Thursday, the legislation was "held" by the Assembly's appropriation's committee—a mysterious maneuver that offers little public transparency, and which makes it unlikely the bill will advance this year. A spokesperson for Assemblymember Buffy Wicks (D-Oakland), the chairperson, had no comment on why Wicks held this particular bill.

Divisions within the agricultural community may help explain why.

One major backer was the Irvine-based Western Growers Association. Matthew Allen, the group's vice president of state government affairs, told me it was crucial that the legislation left final decision-making to local governments. If a county board of supervisors decided it didn't want to see farmland converted from crop production to solar generation, it would have been allowed to say no.

"The county is essentially in charge," Allen said.

Although nobody voted against the bill at first, a few Democrats declined to vote "yes." To help overcome skepticism, Arambula watered down the original bill, which would have zeroed out cancellation fees entirely for solar farm conversions. He also limited the bill to the San Joaquin Valley, to avoid confrontations with some lawmakers in other agricultural regions.

Alas, thus far it's all been for naught—at least partly because of opposition from the farm bureau.

When I asked Scheuring why the farm bureau opposed AB 2528, he told me California has some of the world's most fertile soil—and there's only so much of it. Once a landowner goes solar, he said, their farm ground may never be the same.

"If we pave it over, there it goes," he said.

The group's opposition runs deeper than that, though.

As I learned during a visit to the Imperial Valley, another agricultural empire in California's southeastern corner, some growers—like many of us—simply don't like change. These are folks whose families have enjoyed quiet, agrarian existences for a century or more (even if their workers haven't always had it so good). So when industrial solar projects move in next door, many farmers see the developers as a threat to their way of life—even as their neighbors eagerly sell their land or take lease payments.

Scheuring assured me the farm bureau isn't opposed to solar, and I believe him. He also said he's sympathetic to family farmers who don't feel confident they'll have enough water to keep investing in growing crops. I believe him on that front, too.

When I asked him what would be so bad about making it as easy as possible for growers in water-stressed areas to get out of their Williamson Act contracts, he responded that "getting out of the Williamson Act was not intended to be as easy as possible." If we want to protect farmland and open space, he said, we should protect farmland and open space. Don't weaken the law.

Even for the sake of building climate-friendly energy, which is so hard almost everywhere else?

And this was when I really began to understand.

Scheuring cited the text of the Williamson Act, which highlights the value of avoiding "discontiguous" development, with urban areas leapfrogging open space. He also mentioned the importance of "orderly" development—a point raised on the California Department of Conservation's website, which says the Williamson Act has helped promote "orderly patterns" of development.

"The Williamson Act is a commitment to move deliberately," he said. "To me, that's what promoting orderly growth means."

Landowners who want to go solar can make it happen, he added. They just might have to wait 10 years, or pay a fee.

"I don't buy the argument that if it's going to happen someday [with solar], let's just open the floodgates right now," he said.

That might be fine, if not for the climate crisis. With scientists telling us we've got six years to cut global carbon pollution nearly in half—and the fate of human civilization hanging in the balance—moving deliberately is not an option. We have no choice but to open the floodgates. If we don't embrace some scary changes, and fast, the outcome will be far worse. For everyone.

I don't mean to sound unsympathetic to farmers. I don't grow my own food. I doubt I could if I tried.

But for California lawmakers, this should have been an easy one. Help farmers feed us solar power, if they want to do so.

The bill may get another chance this summer, through more legislative chicanery—especially if Gov. Gavin Newsom makes it a priority. Eddy, whose solar industry group sponsored AB 2528, called it "key to meeting state climate targets."

"We need leadership on these issues and plan to pursue whatever options we can this session," she said.

Newsom was at the Vatican this week talking about climate change.

2024 Los Angeles Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: California farmers are low on water: Why not help them go solar? (2024, May 20)
retrieved 19 July 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2024-05-california-farmers-solar.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.